

Cold Rush

Ella, a hill station in the Badulla District, has become a buzzing tourist hub thanks to its climate

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Ella today resembles a little Nepalese town lying in the shadow of the great Himalayas. It has become a haven for tourists, though more for the sake of its cool climate than for its mountains. Visitors from all over the world, weighed down by backpacks, contribute to the babel here. For every Sri Lankan you meet in Ella, you'll come across three foreigners.

Consequently there are a profusion of cafes and hotels catering exclusively to travellers, making this a hill station version of Hikkaduwa, the tourist hot spot on the south coast. Little black boards advertise 'western breakfasts', pizza and burgers, all of them for higher prices than the Sri Lankan average. Trilingual signboards have the English text sandwiched between German and French.

People from across the globe meet and mingle here. Visitors from all corners of the world come together to create a colony of many nations in this little town nestled in an amphitheatre of mountains. The *lingua franca* here is English, spoken in many accents. Globetrotting Germans and French, for example, can be seen comparing notes in English - discussing places they have already visited, both here and abroad.

Ella has little historical importance; it is the geography that has decided the town's destiny. Tourists who come here are a hardier lot than the beach lovers you'll find at the coast, as you have to be able to stomach the heights. The road leading to Ella, with its many twists and turns, induces nausea in all but the hardiest.

One of the most popular hikes here is Little Adam's Peak. It takes little time to reach the top, but the panorama at the the summit is vast. It is said that on a clear night the light of the Great Basses Reef Lighthouse, in the far away south, can be seen. Closer but still microscopic from this vantage point, the Ella-Wellawaya road snakes sinuously, part of the awe-inspiring Ravana Falls rushing headlong by its side.

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Where there is no solid history to buttress a place, myth and lore insert themselves. This is the case of the Ravana Falls. This dramatic and awe-inspiring waterfall descends majestically from the gigantic cliff face.

It is no surprise that a place with such a strong appeal to the human imagination has inspired many stories over the centuries. The most famous tale recounts how the vilified King Ravana of the Hindu epic *The Ramayana* kidnapped Rama's wife Sita and hid her in a cave behind the waterfall. According to another tradition, an enormous likeness of Ravana is to be found traced on a huge cliff nearby.

The daily influx of tourists does not sully the Ravana Falls. The waterfall remains as aloof and enigmatic as ever. At its foot are crowds of happy visitors; spoilt, rude macaques; and sellers of fruit and mementoes. But they seem to exist in a different plane altogether from the dizzying heights from where the powerful, virginal white waters fall.

Ella knows no 'season' because beautiful weather does not forsake the town. A warm English summer lingers here all year round; so do visitors.

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It is ideal for anyone who loves mountain air and a skyline dominated by endless layers of green.

It is a world of its own, and not Sri Lanka as most Sri Lankans know it. This area of hill country never had much connection with traditional Sri Lankan culture, which for the most part flourished in the dry zone. Ella, like some of its neighbouring hill stations, only really began its relationship with the rest of the country during the late colonial period.

It is very surreal: the kind of place where a leopard could be stalking a domestic Alsatian from behind a border of perfect English roses in a planter's garden. In other words, it has progressed from its wild state almost directly to westernisation, having hardly known the indigenous culture of the island. That is

the beauty of Ella.

